TOK ESSAY

Essay Question number 5

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“That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence” Christopher Hitchens

The quote “That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence” by Christopher Hitchens makes a number of assumptions that must be contemplated and understood before a fair evaluation of the statement can be made. The knowledge issue raised here is: Do we believe all assertions based on evidence? If there is no evidence of an incident or object, should it immediately be deemed irrelevant and thus discarded? I believe the meaning of evidence and subsequently the value of evidence is largely underappreciated or misunderstood. Evidence justifies whether something is an assertion or not and thus, forms the basis of our decision to deem something an assertion. Evidence is also the primary factor in vindicating which assertions should, can, or may, be or not be dismissed. Although perfect knowledge is virtually unobtainable, certainty is the next best realistic objective for knowledge seekers, and is widely sought after. An assertion is a mere gesture of this certainty, or uncertainty, that people seek.

Some argue that without sufficient evidence, an assertion is considered invalid, or less valid, which I agree with in most instances. However this is not always the case, in my opinion evidence is subjective, and deserves equal and fair evaluation in all areas of knowledge. Evidence can be considered any object or incident that proves or validates an assertion, and is less or more significant depending on the context, thus making it subjective. I personally am much more inclined to believe a person’s argument/story equally as much as the evidence which they present. Although some people give assertions the benefit of the doubt, I believe evidence is a tangible believable justification to an assertion and should be considered equally. However in this day and age, new ideas and theories in all subjects fall under a large amount of scrutiny, and are heavily dependent on the amount of evidence present. Whilst Hitchens’ theory, based on the fact that a lack of evidence makes an assertion more liable to be disregarded, is possible, I don’t agree with the statement because evidence is much too subjective.

In the natural sciences, using evidence as a universal method of justification and validation creates a standard by which everyone should adhere in order to prove or verify a theory. Thus some natural sciences follow Hitchens’s statement. For example in Physics, blab la states that blab la. The reason this theory is still used today is because nobody has gained sufficient evidence to prove it wrong. Experiments have been done to verify the theory and most times, coherent results are found. This coherence in results constitutes as evidence, and since there is sufficient evidence to prove it correct, it is therefore logically correct until proven wrong. The use of reason in the natural sciences is linked with whether evidence can justify an assertion. Interestingly however, in order for the scientific theory to be proved correct, the theory or hypothesis must NOT be proven wrong, an incorrect hypothesis must have been drawn in order to prove it right or NOT wrong, so both an incorrect and correct assertion backed by both incorrect and correct evidences must be obtained to prove a theory right. This further shows the sciences dependence on evidence as a method of validation, and how reason significantly affects the use and significance of evidence in the natural sciences, which is in agreement with Hitchens’s statement. In short, for a theory to be disproven, all of the constituent evidence of a theory must be disproven as well. And as evidence is subjective, the perception of whether an assertion on a scientific theory depends upon the amount of evidence present. This means claims/assertions with reason (scientific claims) are regarded more reliable as evidence increases. In addition, an assertion with much less evidence is not deemed reliable. In order to disprove a theory in physics, a physicist would need equal or more counter evidence to make an accurate assertion.

Conversely, this is not the case with other sciences, like the human sciences. An assertion in the human sciences can be virtually baseless, or ungrounded (lack of evidence) and still be considered. An assertion with no previous research could be even more reliable than one with; an idea may be untainted by the idea of another person. The interference of humans causes anomalies in trends, and very few things can be completely accurate. Although averages can be taken, the human unpredictability makes gathering evidence difficult as different ways of knowing have particular effects. Morality and ethics play a role in the decision making of a person. For example, in sociology, when a person choses to help a complete stranger because they appear to be in danger, is it because human nature forces them to immediately help without analysing the situation? Or is it because an assertion has been made based on the evidence at present? It is difficult to measure whether evidence is truly a factor in the decision making of a person, or if it is a matter of ethics. Proving that, when it comes to human nature and ethics, it is not necessarily accurate to say evidence is the basis of making an assertion. This contrasts Hitchens’s statement. However reason allows one to make rational decisions provided there is time to think and use reason, after or in conjunction with a person’s initial moral and ethical judgement.

Reason I believe is the fundamental way of knowing in the statement “That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence”. This is because reason enables us to evaluate the amount of, and need of evidence in our assertions or claims. Our physicist’s theory is most likely going to be accurate for my lifetime, or more until it is disproven, depending upon whether enough counter evidence can be accumulated to disprove it. This is a reasonable claim. It is also reasonable to think that each human’s reaction to a situation, and thus assertion, is different and can be based on evidence, their ethical code and morals, or an initial instinctive reaction. Our human nature basically means that it is difficult to say whether there needs to be evidence to make an assertion or not, and complicates my opinion on whether Hitchens’s statement is in fact true or not, but then again, is this not an assertion made on evidence? Or is it a balanced argument waiting for my ethical decision to conclude.